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Are We Heading Toward Extinction?

The Earth's species — plants, animals and humans, alike — are facing imminent demise. How we got here, and how to cope.

By Catherine Ingram

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The following has been excerpted from the long-form essay Facing Extinction.

For much of my life, I thought our species would soon go extinct. I assumed we might last another hundred years if we were lucky. Now I suspect we are facing extinction in the near future. Can I speculate as to exactly when that might happen? Of course not. My sense of this is based only on probability. It might be similar to hearing about a diagnosis of late-stage pancreatic cancer. Is it definite that the person is going to die soon? No, not definite. Is it highly probable? Yes, one would be wise to face the likelihood and put one's affairs in order.

For decades, I had sensed that things were dramatically worsening, the rate of destruction increasing. As a journalist from 1982 to 1994, I specialized in social and environmental issues. I had written about global warming, the phrase we used in those days, numerous times in the 1980s, but because it seemed a far-off threat, we could intellectually discuss it without fear of it affecting our own lives in terribly significant ways. As time marched on, I began to awaken to how fast the climate was changing and how negative its impacts. It became a strange relief to read and listen to the truth of the situation from people who were studying the hard data as it affirmed my instincts and threw a light on what had been shadowy forebodings, dancing like ghosts in my awareness. It is an ongoing study that has taken me through a powerful internal process — emotional and cathartic — one that I felt might be helpful to share with those who have woken to this dark knowledge or are in the process of waking to it, just as I, over time, found comfort in the reflections of the small yet increasing number of comrades with whom I share this journey.

Because the subject is so tragic and because it can scare or anger people, this is not an essay I ever wanted to write; it is one I would have wanted to *read* along the way. But the words on these pages are meant only for those who are ready for them. I offer no hope or solutions for our continuation, only companionship and empathy to you, the reader, who either knows or suspects that there is no hope or solutions to be found. What we now need to find is courage. What we now need to embrace is love.

Dark Knowledge

Over the past decade, I have been studying climate chaos by reading scientific papers and listening to climate lectures accessible to a layperson. There is no good news to be found there. We have burned so much carbon into the atmosphere that the CO2 levels are higher than they have been for the past 3 million years. In the last decade, our carbon emission levels are the highest in history, and we have not yet experienced their full impact. If we were to stop emitting carbon dioxide tomorrow, we are still on track for much higher heat for decades. And we are certainly not stopping our emissions by tomorrow. This blanket of carbon in the atmosphere has triggered, and will trigger, further runaway warming systems that are not under our control.

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Each day, the extra heat that is trapped near our planet is equivalent to *400,000* Hiroshima bombs. There are no known technologies that can be deployed at world scale to reverse the warming, and many climate scientists feel that the window for doing so is already closed, that we have passed the tipping point and the heat is on runaway no matter what we do.

We are now in the midst of the sixth mass extinction with about 150 plant and animal species going extinct per day. Despite the phrase "the sixth extinction" making its way into mainstream awareness via the publication of Elizabeth Kolbert's Pulitzer Prize-winning book of that title, most people still don't realize that we humans are also on the list.

Santos Rodriguez, 70, walks through a cornfield affected by drought in Honduras on Aug. 15, 2018. ORLANDO

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Some of the consequences we face are mass die-offs due to widespread drought, flooding, fires, forest mortality, runaway diseases and dying ocean life — all of which we now see in preview. If we were to make it through this gantlet of threats, we would still be facing starvation. Grains, the basis of the world's food supply, are reduced on average by 6% for every one degree Celsius rise above pre-industrial norms. We are now about one degree Celsius above and climbing fast.

As I became aware of these facts and many hundreds like them, I also marveled at how oblivious most people are to the coming catastrophes. There has never been a greater news story than that of humans facing full extinction, and yet extinction is rarely mentioned on the evening news, cable channels, or on the front pages of blogs and newspapers. It is as though the world's astronomers were telling us that an asteroid is heading our way and will make a direct hit destined to wipe out all of life to which the public responds by remaining fascinated with sporting events, social media, the latest political scandals and celebrity gossip.

We love to be distracted from ourselves, and we have myriad ways of doing that in our time. We pay big money for the privilege and we run about chasing objects and experiences in its service. We seem to be evolutionarily designed to put aside or entirely ignore future threats and instead focus only on immediate concerns and personal desires. This is understandable since for most of human history there was nothing we could do about future possibilities or events occurring far from where we lived. With some notable exceptions, evolution didn't select for long-term survival planning. Being concerned about climate change does not come naturally to us.

Daniel Gilbert, author and Harvard professor of psychology, proposes several features for why our brains respond primarily to immediate threats. Unless climate chaos is a threat to us today, we don't think about it. I find that a lot of the data we see in conservative climate reports refers to horrific changes that will happen by 2100. When we see the year 2100, we easily think, "Whew! No problem." Of course, changes occurring by 2100 is an overly optimistic timeline, yet it shows how the brain responds to slow-motion threat in the future, even when it will affect the lives of children whom we know in the present.

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Another reason Gilbert proposes for why we ignore climate threats is that for millennia we have relied on our highly developed sense apparatus as physical creatures to gauge changes and threats in our environment — changes of temperature, weight, pressure, sound or smell. If changes occur at a slow enough pace, they can fly under the radar of our notice. The frog boiling in the pot that is only gradually being heated.

During the recent historic floods in Queensland, Australia, the rivers broke their banks and washed into the city of Townsville. As a result, there were crocodiles and snakes in the flooded streets and in people's backyards. It might well concentrate the mind and promote a flight response to find oneself wading in floodwater on a street or yard that contained crocodiles and deadly snakes. But short of such clear and present dangers, our threat response is slow.

A view of the flooded area of Townsville, Australia, on Feb. 4, 2019, where crocodiles and snakes flowed from rivers into streets and backyards. IAN HITCHCOCK VIA GETTY IMAGES

The Allure Of Denial

As you begin to awaken to the specter of extinction, you will likely feel the powerful lure of your usual distractions. You may want to go back to sleep. But denial will become harder and harder to maintain because once your attention has turned to this subject, you will see the evidence of it everywhere, both locally and globally.

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And you will find yourself among the throngs of humanity who are easily distracted and amused, playing with their toys as the house burns, “tranquilized by the trivial,” as Kierkegaard said, and speaking of the future as though it was going to go on as it has. After all, we made it this far. We have proven our superiority at figuring things out and removing obstacles to our desires. We killed off most of the large wild mammals and most of the indigenous peoples in order to take their lands. We bent nature to our will, paved over her forests and grasslands, rerouted and dammed her rivers, dug up what journalist Thom Hartmann calls her “ancient sunlight,” and burned that dead creature goo into the atmosphere so that our vehicles could motor us around on land, sea, and air and our weapons could keep our enemies in check. And now we have given her atmosphere a high fever. But, as the old adage has it, (a phrase I first heard in the 1980s, which has informed me ever since), “nature bats last.”

You may find yourself in the company of people who seem to have no awareness of the consequences we face or who don't want to know or who might have a momentary inkling but cannot bear to face it. You may find that people become angry if you steer the conversation in the direction of planetary crisis. You may sense that you are becoming a social pariah due to what you see, even when you don't mention it, and you may feel lonely in the company of most people you know. For you, it's not just the elephant in the room; it's the elephant *on fire* in the room, and yet you feel you can rarely say its name.

"We are now in the midst of the sixth mass extinction with about 150 plant and animal species going extinct per day. Most people still don't realize that we humans are also on the list."

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It is helpful to realize that most people are not ready for this conversation. They may never be ready, just as some people die

after a long illness, still in denial that death was at their doorstep. It is a mystery as to who can handle the truth of our situation and who runs from it as though their sanity depended on not seeing it. There is even a strange phenomenon that some of my extinction-aware friends and I have noticed: You might sometimes find relaxation in the company of those who don't know and don't want to know. For a while you pretend that all is well or at least the same as it has been. You discuss politics, the latest drama series, new cafes. You visit the Matrix for a little R&R. But this usually doesn't last long as the messages coming from the catastrophe are unrelenting.

There is one category of people that I have found especially resistant to seeing this darkest of truths: parents. A particular and by now familiar glazed look comes over their faces when the conversation gets anywhere near the topic of human extinction. And how could it be otherwise? It is built into the DNA that parents (not all, of course) love their children above themselves. They would sacrifice anything for them. So to think that there will be no protection for their children in the future, that no amount of money or homesteading or living on a boat or in a gated community or on a mountaintop or growing a secret garden will save them is too unbearable a thought to hold for even a second. I have also noticed a flash of anger arise in the midst of the distracted look on their faces, an almost subliminal message that says, "Don't say another word on this subject."

It is a subject I have learned to avoid in the company of parents although, to my surprise, I am recently finding more of them coming to terms with it. It is an added layer of grief, to be sure, and I can only admire and grieve with them in the knowledge that it is unlikely their children will live to old age, leaving aside what they may suffer beforehand.

Of course, there are now many millions of parents in the world who

have already had to come to terms with this. Hundreds of millions of climate refugees for whom any fretting about the future would seem the greatest of luxuries and privileges. They are struggling for survival due to climate catastrophes, even as you read these words.

Too Many Of Us, Too Little Of Everything Else

In 1952, when I was born, there were approximately 2.6 billion people on earth. There are now 7.7 billion, a threefold increase in my lifetime. Our use rate of resources would allow for our planet to sustainably host only about 1.5 billion people. As William Catton explained in his 1980 book "Overshoot," we are in "carrying capacity deficit." In other words, the load on resource use is far in excess of its carrying capacity. Of course, the only way we have been able to pull this off is by stealing from the future, just as we might have a garden of food that could last 10 people through the winter and instead we have a wild party for a thousand and go through the entire supply in an evening.

It is also troubling to realize that whatever reasonable measures we might attempt to mitigate our situation, and there are none known that can be done at scale, the addition of roughly 220,000 humans per day (births minus deaths) would curtail our efforts at mitigation.

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According to many scientific studies, some of the inevitable outcomes of overpopulation are severely polluted water, increased air pollution and lung diseases, proliferation of infectious diseases, overwhelmed hospitals, rising crime rates, deforestation, loss of wildlife leading to mass extinctions, widespread food shortages, vanishing fish in the oceans, superbugs and airborne diseases along with diminished capacity to treat them, proliferation of AIDS, less access to safe drinking water, new parasites, desertification, rising regional conflicts and war. As astrobiology professor Peter Ward explained in a story on the BBC, “If you look at any biological system, when it overpopulates it begins to poison its home.”

Amid global species decline, livestock numbers are growing. Industrial farming is a major contributor to climate change. N_U_T VIA GETTY IMAGES

Of course, when we speak of overpopulation, we specifically refer to humans. In fact, human activity is causing massive die-offs of the other species. With overpopulation and pollution we lose habitats

that sustain biodiversity and we have consequently lost 60% of the world's wildlife since 1970. The United Nation's intergovernmental report on biodiversity found that a further 1 million animal and plant species are now at risk for extinction.

Only our livestock are growing in numbers. Think about that phrase in its two component words: "live" and "stock." Living animals as stock, as product. To view animals as products requires ignoring the plight of these living creatures: the industrial food systems of torture for hundreds of millions of animals — animals who have emotions, care for their young, and who suffer fear and pain only to be slaughtered in the end, perhaps the only mercy they will know. Industrial animal farming is also known to be one of the top causes of global warming.

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The biodiversity loss of *wild* animals and plants, however, creates a domino effect into what is called *co-extinctions:* When a species at early risk of environmental changes dies, the various species that depended on that one die, and then the species that depended on those die.

The domino effect in extinctions goes into yet another exponential

feedback trajectory. Scientists Giovanni Strona and Corey Bradshaw conducted an experiment in which they computer-modeled "2,000 virtual earths to create conditions of species-like entities arranged in interconnected ecological communities." They then subjected those communities to various environmental stresses, particularly those of temperature. What they found can be gleaned from the title of their peer-reviewed paper, published in Scientific Reports: "Co-extinctions Annihilate Planetary Life During Extreme Environmental Change." In other words, the health of the interconnected natural world depends on the web of life within it. When substantial parts of that web die off, it *annihilates* planetary life in general. This includes, of course, the higher and more complex forms of life. That means us. Thinking that we can lose most of the biodiversity of planetary life and still find ways to feed ourselves is delusional. At a recent biodiversity conference in Dublin, Irish President Michael Higgins said in his address to the assembly, "If we were coal miners, we would be up to our knees in dead canaries."

Along with all of the other threats we face, co-extinction within the natural world is becoming one of the most pressing problems. For anyone familiar with general systems theory, this is easily intuited. Yet many people compartmentalize information when they hear of extinctions of the other plants and creatures and think it has little to do with their own existence. They see the iconic image of the polar bear floating on a small ice chunk and think, "What does the loss of polar bears mean to my life? Nothing." They might, however, be surprised to learn that the loss of the world's insects is going to impact everyone on the food chain as the pollination of plant life dramatically slows.

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A recent article in The New York Times titled "The Insect Apocalypse Is Here" explains the concept of "functional extinction," that is, when a species is still present but so diminished in its numbers that it no longer functions or interacts within its environment. In the case of insects, for example, it results in "an extinction of seed dispersal and predation and pollination and all the other ecological functions an animal once had, which can be devastating even if some individuals still persist." It doesn't require a full-scale extinction of insects or other species to disrupt their necessary role in a healthy ecosystem. A partial die-off will do the job. Inability to grow fruits, vegetables and grains in the food-growing regions will inevitably lead to soaring food prices and starvation for millions.

Evolved For Extinction

We humans love technology. It has been the means by which we became the dominant species on the planet, doubled our life spans, traveled the globe collecting resources and ideas, and hooked ourselves up to instantaneously connect with anyone anywhere from our own homes. It is a source of entertainment, education, artistic creativity, medical advances and uses too numerous to list. It has also been a source of destruction. It has allowed us to rapidly denude and poison the ecosystem and caused the extinction of much of the natural world. As environmental activist Joanna Macy told me in an interview more than 30 years ago, "We think technology will save us. Technology got us into this mess."

There is a theory known as The Great Filter, which seeks to explain why, despite the overwhelming odds of there being life on other planets, we have not heard from any of them. Astrophysicists have now calculated that in the known universe there are about 10 billion trillion planets that would have what they call “a Goldilocks zone,” planets whose orbits are in a particular proximity to their star that is similar to our own, not too close and not too far. Just right.

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The Great Filter proposes that before a civilization reaches the level of development that would allow for intergalactic communication and travel, it wipes itself out through climate change, overpopulation or other factors having to do with the rise of technological civilization.

I first read The Great Filter theory a few years ago. It made sense to me then and ever since. In previous years, I had considered our predicament as a “species problem,” that we had a terrible kink in our evolution that made us ecocidal, homicidal and suicidal. But the theory of The Great Filter allowed me to see that humans are just doing what we were evolutionarily destined to do. It is not an aberration of evolution, even though it will destroy all complex life. Nor is it the result of any one thread of evolution, any particular age or technological advancement or economic system.

Take capitalism for instance. It is unsustainable at its core as it relies on continued economic expansion and growth in a system of finite resources. In the process, it also speeds up the complete elimination of the very resources on which it relies. But the problem is that the human creature will postpone challenging that system as long as the goods keep flowing, no matter the future costs. Capitalism is a perfect representation of the human need and greed for *more*, future be damned. Very few cultures in modern civilization have managed to resist it. There is now a lot of false hope around "Green Capitalism" and the Green New Deal in the USA. Given that capitalism, of any color, inevitably relies on extraction of resources in the production or transport of goods, feeling encouraged about Green Capitalism is another form of deluded *bargaining* in the Kubler-Ross stages of grief. As Derrick Jensen elegantly defines it: "Capitalism is a system by which the living is converted into the dead."

Capitalism itself is heading to its own extinction. As resources dwindle and the numbers of people vying for them increase, we are facing collapse of the largest Ponzi scheme of all, the global financial system.

Letting Go Of The Future

As your awareness metabolizes the deadly threats ahead and the unlikeliness of solutions that will change the course, you might find a strange reordering of your thoughts and motivations. For one thing, you will no longer need to consider what you might leave behind as there will not likely be anyone there to see or experience it, at least not for long.

There is a cognitive dissonance that takes getting used to when you realize there is no need to consider how you or your name will be

remembered in the future. Not only that, your interest in future projections about life begins to fall away. You may marvel at how many personal conversations with people you know or news items from around the world assume that human life carries on indefinitely. You may find it difficult to hold interest in these conversations and stories, as though you chanced upon a madman on a street corner earnestly proclaiming his grand plans for the future when it is clear he is hallucinating. You don't hang on his every word.

But the habit of *future thinking* is a hard one to shake.

Letting go of the future means reordering your tendencies of thinking about the future. How psychologically invested you have been in your ideas and hopes about the future will likely determine how well you adapt to ignoring those kinds of thoughts as they arise. You may also find a stronger habit in present awareness begin to prevail.

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In this time of The Great Dying, it may seem for you, as it does for me, that reminders of former times become hauntings of all that has been lost forever. The contrast of how things felt then to how things feel now can be unbearable. I notice that I eschew watching documentaries of the '60s and '70s, an era in which I came of age,

when hope and every imaginable kind of freedom were our daily fare, represented in our music, our political activism and in an almost shimmering joy in the atmosphere. We would "change the world, rearrange the world," as Graham Nash wrote in the lyrics of his protest song "Chicago" in 1971. Now, I have to be careful about even hearing the music from those halcyon days.

Long ago, a friend who had spent two years in a federal prison for growing marijuana told me that the most difficult time of each month was when his wife and young children made the drive of many hours to visit him. He would end up depressed for days after their visits, having entered for those moments the living reminder of the colorful world, far from the ashen walls of his own. But at least in his case at that time, the other world was one to which he could eventually return or could imagine his children would go on enjoying.

Of course, letting go of both the future and the past doesn't mean your life-affirming acts in present time are irrelevant. Pulitzer Prize winner and U.S. poet laureate W.S. Merwin wrote: "On the last day of the world, I would want to plant a tree." It is the purest kind of offering, one that has no possibility of future reward. We, too, can make our final acts on earth a testament to the human capacity for mercy, a living bow to our highest good — for its own sake — even though it will not save the day.

"We think technology will save us. Technology got us into this mess."

- Joanna Macy, environmental activist

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You may feel fury at times in seeing the desecration of the natural world and in realizing its destruction is due to human activity on the planet. It seems tragically unfair that one species could cause the elimination of almost all the others. The rate of extinction is now about 1,000 times faster than before humans arrived. It is natural to want to load the blame somewhere. We want to have a first cause onto which we can displace our anger and have a sense of control. "If only we hadn't developed agriculture" (which allowed for long-term food storage and overpopulation). "If only the world had been run by matriarchies." "If only we had a bottom-up economic system." "If only we had all learned to meditate." If only.

In a recent blog post, writer James Kunstler proposed a pithy theory of why humans chose each step of our path in history: "It just seemed a good idea at the time." We plunged forward with each new way of doing things, each new invention, because it made life easier *at the time*. There was no intention to destroy ourselves. On the contrary, for most of the time since the Industrial Revolution, it seemed that life was getting better for greater numbers of people. With medical advances, we wiped out most of the contagious deadly diseases, controlled infections and greatly extended life expectancy. We built transportation capabilities that allowed us to travel to the far ends of the earth in a day and thereby learn of other cultures while on their own turf. And then we hooked ourselves up to each other in a world of instantaneous communication, which has been a whole lot of fun. But we didn't factor in the cost of all this bounty as we built

modern civilization. We didn't understand that running the world on fossil fuels that were needed for our machinery — our cars, planes, cargo ships, tankers, electric grids and just about everything — would someday do us in. Nearly all of us went along on the ride and enjoyed the benefits, and now the party's over and the bill has come due. But where can we lay blame?

Allowing Grief

We grieve because we love. To the degree that your heart is shattered over loss is precisely the degree to which you loved that which has gone.

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However, witnessing the death of all of life, even though there may be acceptance of the *fact* of it and even though one may no longer blame anyone or anything, comes with a different kind of grief. It is depressing on a scale that is unique to our time.

No matter how clear and rational our understanding of the situation, many of my extinction-aware friends admit that the magnitude of the loss we are undergoing is unacceptable to the innermost psyche. It might be akin to a parent losing a young child. Even when there was

no one to blame and no story of “if only,” the sorrow can rarely be fully overcome. Only this time, it is all the little children. All the animals. All the plants. All the ice.

I am aware that virtually no one in my family and few of my friends are either ready to hear this information now or will be prepared to face what is ahead in time. It is pointless to try to warn them if they are not ready. My attempts at hinting usually lead to blank stares or agitation. I have come to accept that for some people, their fate is to continue the romp of life, oblivious to the dangers ahead. Maybe it is best that they enjoy whatever good times are left, even though there might be extreme panic in the last phase. Maybe it is just as well that they continue as they have been for as long as possible. Maybe it will postpone chaos and lawlessness the world over until the systems fully crash. But for those of us who cannot look away, we carry the anticipatory grief for those who cannot bear to look.

A view of sea ice in Greenland. The Arctic is one of the regions hardest hit by climate change. MARIO TAMA VIA GETTY IMAGES

Climate journalist Dahr Jamail knows well the process of grief in

watching earth changes before his very eyes. A longtime mountain climber, he has observed the permanent retreat of countless glaciers in Alaska, the Pacific Northwest and elsewhere, having known those regions when the glaciers were still in full.

In the final chapter of "The End of Ice: Bearing Witness and Finding Meaning in the Path of Climate Disruption," he writes: "Each time another scientific study is released showing yet another acceleration of the loss of ice atop the Arctic Ocean, or sea level rise projections are stepped up yet again, or news of another species that has gone extinct is announced, my heart breaks for what we have done and are doing to the planet. I grieve, yet this ongoing process has become more like peeling back the layers of an onion — there is always more work to do, as the crisis we have created for ourselves continues to unfold. And somewhere along the line I surrendered my attachment to any results that might stem from my work. I am hope free."

I recently interviewed Dahr on the question of hope with regard to the many non-harmful or natural geo-engineering projects of mitigation and drawdown of carbon that are underway. These include planting trees, enriching soil, using particular forms of effective seaweed for carbon capture, solar farms, onshore wind turbines, plant-rich diets and educating girls (educated girls have fewer babies), to name a few. But Dahr is wary about the timeline of these proposals.

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“Hope is about the future and gives us a sense that we have more time when, in fact, we are out of time. I think it is awesome that people are doing things to mitigate the damage as it is the right thing to do. Some of us feel morally obliged to take action in those ways. On the other hand, when you look at the amount of carbon that needs to be drawn down and how fast that has to happen, it is a physical impossibility to scale that to the level we would need.

“Take, for instance, wide-scale rejuvenation of soil. If every farmer were incentivized and mandated to incorporate practices that would rejuvenate soil at world scale and we coupled that with wide-scale tree planting — of course, all of these things take time — at least we would have set in motion some actions that might still help. What makes natural geo-engineering, soil sequestration, planting trees and so on impossible for actually turning the tide on this is that there is a near total lack of political will to mandate any of it. If all of a sudden we could replace the horrible governments with functional ones that represented what we now need and if that is where all the funding went, yeah, it might actually make a dent in mitigation. But the reality is that there is not one country that I know of doing everything it can in that direction. Certainly none of the major emitters — Russia, the U.S., China and India — are doing anything of significance; all four are just stomping on the gas. There is nothing to indicate that a change of course will happen. Nothing. Not now. Not next year. Not in 10 years. So the lack of political will is going to negate any and all natural geo-engineering efforts.”

He added: “Nevertheless, we are still obliged to do what we can in our own ways, even if there is no chance for long-term mitigation. I

was talking with a friend before I finished my book, and I said to him, 'Why even write this book?' And my friend said, 'You know, Dahr, if the total outcome of your book buys one little organism in the Amazon one more week of life, then it is completely worth it.'"

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"For people who have limited capacity for denial ... maintaining hope becomes impossible. It is a surprising relief to let go of it."

For people who have limited capacity for denial, and I suspect that if you have read this far you are one of those, maintaining hope becomes impossible. It is a surprising relief to let go of it.

However, you may then experience the brunt force of sorrow. Grief, straight up. It may sneak into your dreams. It may come in ordinary moments such as smelling the spray of an orange; or when a child whom you love says the words, "When I grow up..." It may come when you observe greed, ignorance and cruelty, as these are reminders of why the world is dying. Sometimes you may feel you

could cry and never stop crying.

To stay steady, you may be forced into a witnessing presence, vast enough to contain your grief. You may acclimate to living with grief without the assumption that it should or will dissipate. Despite this or because of it, you may notice a growing tendency to appreciate simple moments of connection and many small joys. And you may feel more awake than you have for a long time.

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Living with the grief of facing human extinction may be akin to how a person with a terminal diagnosis might experience his or her final phase, the awareness of death undeniable, and the magnificence of life ever more obvious.

Choosing Love

What else is there to do now? Here we are, some of the last humans who will experience this beautiful planet since Homo sapiens began their journey some 200,000 years ago. Now, in facing the extinction of our species, you may wonder if there is any point in going on. If your future projects make no sense any more, if you feel it is unwise to have children, and that things are going to get really hard and

bad, you may not want to bother living any longer. Yet, there are other ways to use your attention that make life still relevant and even beautiful.

For nearly 30 years I have led public sessions and silent retreats around the world. In those gatherings, I encourage people to manage their own attention by moving it into present awareness, gratitude and an immersion in the senses. However you are using your attention in any given moment is conditioning the experience you are having in that moment. We live in a time when managing our attention will be all the more necessary to stay calm and to allow us to enjoy and be helpful in whatever time is left. Directing attention is a facility that becomes habitual with time. Left to its own conditioned patterns, our minds get into all kinds of trouble (unless one was very lucky in one's conditioning, which is rare). Developing the habit of redirecting your awareness when your mind is lost in fear or troubling stories induces confidence along the way. Your attention starts to incline toward ease more frequently. You find that you can choose calm. You can choose gratitude. You can choose love.

Jonathan Franzen, winner of the National Book Award and many other literary honors, writes in his latest book, "The End of the End of the Earth": "Even in a world of dying, new loves continue to be born." This is now the time to give yourself over to what you love, perhaps in new and deeper ways. Your family and friends, your animal friends, the plants around you, even if that means just the little sprouts that push their way through the sidewalk in your city, the feeling of a breeze on your skin, the taste of food, the refreshment of water, or the thousands of little things that make up your world and which are your own unique treasures and pleasures. Make your moments sparkle within the experience of your own senses, and direct your attention to anything that gladdens your heart. Live your bucket list now.

Despite our having caused so much destruction, it is important to also consider the wide spectrum of possibilities that make up a human life. Yes, on one end of that spectrum is greed, cruelty and ignorance; on the other end is kindness, compassion and wisdom. We are imbued with great creativity, brilliant communication and extraordinary appreciation of and talent for music and other forms of art. We cry in tenderness when we are touched by love, beauty or loss. We cry in empathy for others' pain. Some of us even sacrifice our lives for strangers. There is no other known creature whose spectrum of consciousness is as wide and varied as our own.

You likely know well the spectrum of human consciousness within yourself. Perhaps you have had many moments when greed or hatred overtook your mind. But it is likely you have also had many moments when you knew that love was all that ever really mattered. And in your final breaths it is likely to be all that is left of you, a cosmic story whispered only once.

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As Leonard Cohen, one of my closest friends and life mentor, sang in "Boogie Street," "It is in love that we are made; in love we disappear."

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We Track Sales For A Living. These Are The Ones Worth Your Money On Prime Day.

If You're 40 And Up, You'll Love These Prime Day Sales

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